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# Vincent de Paul: A Saint Who Got His Worlds Together

BY

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"Holistic" is a word which appears in the vocabulary of many current spiritual writers. It is a term which argues for a world view which joins everything together into a single whole. Holistic presses the organic paradigm; it looks to the mutual reference of everything inside an organism and to the ways in which the parts are more fundamentally connected than they are separated. Its enemy is dualism. Holism warns of the danger of false divisions, that is, splits read into reality which people observe on some plane but which actually converge at their deepest levels into a bountiful unity.

Students of spirituality are especially sensitive to the pitfalls of a divided universe. They have traced many blind alleys in the history of Christian living to times when hard and fast divisions between body and spirit, grace and nature, heaven and earth, secular and sacred have prevailed. The more biblically founded view, they point out, is an interconnected one where mutuality rather than exclusion reigns. Forgetting this underlying oneness, it is hard to resist pressures from the tradition to compartmentalize the spiritual life, a move so at odds with the late twentieth-century spirit which suspects any dichotomous universe.

This article presents Vincent de Paul as a case study in overcoming some of these divisions. It looks at his manner of integrating the life of faith with so-called secular existence, and more particularly examines his way of blending a spiritual vision with the hard-nosed world of finance and business. In Vincent's own spirit, the focus is on practical wisdom: that knowledge (gained only in the doing) of how to weave seemingly disparate worlds into a single cloth. A secondary concern is the way in which his story—and for that matter the life of

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any saint—can best be used to influence present day faith. We begin with two presuppositions which serve as introductions to the central points.

### Saints and Their Influence on Us

Some recent studies on the idea of “saint” have highlighted a certain tension between the height of the example a saintly person gives and the possibility of imitating him or her.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, these individuals have been singled out just because they are standard-setters. They exercise a vivid influence for the good in a given society. But to the extent their example is so lofty that it reaches far beyond what most everybody else experiences as “the real world,” their modeling becomes forbidding.<sup>3</sup> Discouragement overtakes the intended encouragement.

Unsettling questions begin to surface. Are there points of contact between the saint’s life and my own—or have I been left in the dust of my own earthly concerns? Does he really know what I have to face? Has she felt anything like *this* set of forces on her road to holiness? More to our point here, what does this saint, Vincent de Paul, know of business—of the push and pull and grind of the marketplace? Granting the depth and richness of his spiritual experience, was it shaped, at least analogously, by the kinds of pressures which the business person has to withstand? If not, this saint’s story, too, lifts off from this world and flies into its own orbit, perhaps admired but from too remote a distance to have influence. In short, what are the possibilities of getting the worlds of sanctity and finance together?

The second issue concerns the manner in which lives of holy ones are brought to bear on present spiritual living. One approach might be termed prescriptive. It asks: what directives for living can be drawn from the actions and attitudes this person showed? There are principles and behavior patterns embedded in this saint’s life which can serve as guides for present action. How to extract them? Francis of Assisi, for instance, out of a profound desire to live out his sense of total dependence on God, made his way by begging. Therefore, in our affairs, too, there should be some embracing of radical unpredictability

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<sup>2</sup>Lawrence Cunningham, “A Decade of Research on the Saints: 1980-1990,” *Theological Studies* 53, no. 3 (September 1992): 517-33.

<sup>3</sup>In Cunningham’s words, “the greatest saints have been so singular that it would not always naturally occur to us to use their lives as templates for our own” (*ibid.*, 523).

and a large dose of reliance on others. The example is awkward, perhaps, but it points up the method of looking at the holy one's life and drawing from it clear and usable lessons.

While this approach affords a kind of clarity, it stands on shaky ground because of the often wide gap between the saint's era and the present. The reader who is conscious of historical development is wary of clear and simple crossovers. Too many changed circumstances and new assumptions lie between the distant past and now. If the moral lessons have not been carefully passed through the screen of shifting horizons, they appear stretched and even fanciful. Applications to current situations are suspected of being as much a projection of the interpreter's agenda as it is a transmission of the saint's world view.

An alternate way of bringing saints to bear on spiritual growth is through the imagination. Most readers are familiar with the recent attention to the role which the powers of affection play in following the good. Logic may package rules and norms quite clearly and distinctly, but logic of itself does not bring about my adherence. The deeper emotions must come into play; these are the engines which drive me toward the good. Making the actual choice happens, in the first place, in the imagination. That is where the attraction or repulsion of a given value registers. As its first move, spiritual education aims for the affections and the imagination. It works to shape the image field in which I picture the good.

The story of a saint, rightly told, appeals directly to the imagination. The narrative of his or her life presents a drama which invites the listener in—and much more as participant than spectator. Such a biography lays out a world. It features certain preferences, dislikes, blind spots, favorite causes, villains, and heroes, great deeds and mean ones—all fixed inside a particular set of spiritual coordinates.

The saint's story related in this way does not lend itself immediately to drawing lessons for life. This latter approach (moralizing) can actually dull the narrative power of the story because it short-circuits the appearance of the world the saint presents. Rather it is the story itself which remaps the religious imagination. Narrative has a distinctive way of making an entrance onto the stage on which spiritual reasoning happens. If welcomed, the story can rearrange the scenery on that set and drive the play's action.

Bearing these two points in mind (splits between faith and life and the way a saint's *story* influences mine), we move to Vincent's expe-

rience. We first review his overall life in order to touch it more directly to our imaginations. Then we examine Vincent's business credentials to show that his are indeed quite impressive.

### Vincent's Story

Vincent was born in the south of France in 1581 to a relatively well-off peasant farming family. Ordained a priest at the age of nineteen, he held various educational jobs in his home district but soon migrated to Paris to better his prospects. After a few years of looking around for a stable position, he landed a job in the household of a rich and politically influential family. While there, two crucial things happened. He came under the influence of Pierre de Bérulle, one of the premier spiritual directors and writers of his day. He also began to encounter many poor people as he ministered on his employer's vast properties and also in the prison ships this nobleman commanded.

The coming together of a deepened spiritual life (one centered on the person of Jesus) and a growing awareness of down-and-out people brought about a change in Vincent. He began to notice the uniqueness of these special ones of God. In an increasingly rooted way, they became for him *the* privileged group, the place where the most important events occurred. Placing his feet more and more on what he now experienced as holy ground (these poor ones), he started projects for their benefit that were both religious and humanitarian at the same time. That is to say, Vincent grew in his appreciation for the close connection between the spiritual and material aspects of human existence. This was not an intuition that the prevailing spiritual wisdom supported. But for Vincent, it was the entire person—body, mind, and spirit—that was meant to experience the healing of the gospel.

Gradually at first, and then in a rolling expansion, he undertook work after work for the poor, first of France and then of the world. He founded a number of organizations made up of both religious and laity for the express purpose of helping in this kind of service. By the end of his life, he had put together projects for the homeless, the unchurched, abandoned children, the beggars of the cities, prostitutes, the elderly and sick poor, prisoners, refugees, unprotected women, juvenile delinquents, lepers, dispossessed clergy and religious, mentally ill and still others. His operations spread to over ten countries and his collaborators numbered in the thousands. And these activities do not include his heavy involvement in church reform, particularly

in renewing seminary education. At his funeral, the preacher proclaimed that Vincent in his sixty-year ministry had “changed the face of the French Church.”<sup>4</sup> The tens of thousands of individuals who were better off spiritually and physically provided the best evidence for the claim.

### Vincent and the World of Business

We move to the issue of Vincent’s familiarity with the world of business. A saint to be sure, it is clear that his sanctity came to blossom in a world of political hard knocks, financial and legal risk taking, and sometimes fierce corporate pressures.

His heavy involvement in the institutional world evolved because it was necessary to finance all the initiatives he undertook. Hospitals, shelters, seminaries, half-way houses, preaching teams, orphanages, soup kitchens, war relief campaigns—they all needed sound and long term backing. This is not to say that Vincent’s primary aim was to build a financial empire. His eye was on the purpose of his foundations—to assist the downtrodden. But, deeply involved in commerce he was. The amount of detailed effort he gave daily to overseeing his organizations, and in particular their funding, reveals an individual who knew firsthand the struggles of staying solvent in a volatile financial world.

In his time—as is most likely the case in most every other—money to support charitable organizations was scarce. To float his enterprises he had to take advantage of almost every income-producing system there was.

Vincent’s usual method was to secure some kind of endowment, manage it well, and build it up over time. He worked hard at convincing benefactors to donate profits from such diverse holdings as farms, mills, public transportation systems, and taxes on dry goods, wine, and salt. Capitalizing on the success of his early ventures, he persuaded a still wider circle of the wealthy to hand over to him amounts of cash and stocks as well as title to the income produced by various parishes, hospitals, and abbeys.<sup>5</sup> So many of the thousands of letters

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<sup>4</sup>Cited in André Dodin, C.M., *Vincent de Paul and Charity: A Contemporary Portrait of his Life and Times*. Trans. J. Smith and D. Saunders (New Rochelle: New City Press, 1993), 78.

<sup>5</sup>José María Román, C.M., “The Foundations of St. Vincent de Paul,” *Vincentian Heritage* 14, no. 2 (1988): 134-61.

he wrote are devoted to tracking these streams of revenue and keeping the channels open for increasing their yield.

Vincent's preferred method of building up his capital was real estate. A giveaway line from one of his letters betrays this bent, probably a holdover from his deeply ingrained farm wisdom: wealth was in the land. "In order to preserve the institutions, the revenue must be in land. If not, fifty years from now, the endowment will be cut by half. The cost of things doubles every fifty years, at least."<sup>6</sup> It perhaps gives him more of a business credential to find out that his hunch about property values versus stocks was wrong. In the five decades after his death, real estate lost considerably against the market!

It is especially in his land dealings that we uncover the business side of Vincent. For him, it was never enough to be given property; its value must be made to increase. A recent study of seventeenth-century French business archives reveals a man with a method.<sup>7</sup>

Farms were the kind of bequest most often given to Vincent. After he secured title, he typically began strategizing about how to acquire the adjoining properties. His intent was to raise the value of the purchase on two scores: with more acreage, the farming became more efficient, and a larger tract of continuous land was more marketable than smaller isolated parcels. Vincent would purchase or exchange acreage, sometimes in his own name and sometimes anonymously through an agent. There are instances when this tactic of concentrating property tripled the original value.

In the majority of instances, Vincent did not delegate the managerial details to a subordinate but carried them out himself. His correspondence is filled with savvy instructions on how to proceed, what to guard against, and whom to see. He traveled extensively throughout France to put his own touch on negotiations. The archives, for instance, reveal his name penned on twelve contracts of sale and exchange in a single day in order to amalgamate a farm property just outside of Paris. That many transactions were not unusual for him,

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<sup>6</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louise de Marillac, November 1637, in *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondance, Entretiens, Documents*, ed. Pierre Coste, C.M., 14 vols. (Paris: 1920-1926), 1: 394 (hereinafter cited as Coste, CED; *Saint Vincent de Paul: Correspondence, Conferences, Documents*. I *Correspondence*, vol. 1 (1607-1639), newly translated, edited, and annotated from the 1920 edition of Pierre Coste, C.M., ed. Jacqueline Kilar, D.C., trans. Helen Marie Law, D.C., John Marie Poole, D.C., James R. King, C.M., Francis Germovnik, C.M., annotated John W. Carven, C.M., (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1985), 1: 384 (hereinafter cited as *Correspondence*).

<sup>7</sup>Jean Jaquart, "St. Vincent's Real Estate Policy," *Vincentian Heritage* 7, no. 2 (1986): 181-294.

especially in his prodigiously productive middle years when he spread his foundations geometrically. He knew the territory first hand.

He also kept his hand in the management of the farms. Either he would send lay members of his congregations to run them or, more frequently, he would rent out the land. The farms went to the highest bidder. Tenants had to sign a contract containing precise riders. For instance, he wrote in rights for his traveling bands of missionaries to stay free in the leased house, established rates for loans of grain and seed, named the kind of tree he wanted planted on the farm, and specified the percentage of profit to be returned. This hands-on style shows itself in a letter to one of his coworkers at the beginning of the planting season in 1638.

Please send someone tomorrow morning to the farmer up in Courcelles to tell him I want him to send one of his sons-in-law to me. . . . The oat-planting season is growing short. He had only fifteen more acres left to cultivate. Also, please send for the farmer's oldest boy, the married one in La Chapelle. Find out from him how M. Bienvenu, our tenant in Gonesse, had him plow twice over the wheat field in which the Abbot had his own oats sown—the one behind the barn. It looks to me that the first time he did it, the plow was turned over on one end. The second time through the field, the plow was not turned over but worked in the usual way. I ask you in no uncertain terms, Father, to find out from the young man what happened?<sup>8</sup>

Vincent's reputation as a religious reformer did not shield him from the slings and arrows of business gone wrong. His letters are sprinkled with complaints about uncollected rents, unjust taxes, court suits, ruined harvests, delinquent debtors, contested wills, and crippling war damages.

One litigation in particular has him go into the chapel to ask his fellow priests and brothers to pray for a successful outcome to a trial.<sup>9</sup> And their prayers were *not* answered—at least immediately. It seems a farmer had handed his land over to Vincent on the condition that the priest manage it and pay the man an annuity for life. Ten years after

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<sup>8</sup>Vincent de Paul to Jean Dehorgny, June 1638, Coste, *CED*, 1: 486; *Correspondence*, 1: 476-77.

<sup>9</sup>Conference to Priests of the Mission, September 1658, Coste, *CED*, 12: 52.



the farmer died and title had passed to Vincent, the man's relatives sued to regain it. Because of friends in high places (according to Vincent), the family won. Vincent chose not to appeal. We see him going back to chapel to ask his brothers to pray for him, but this time that he might accept the decision in peace. More pious writers end the story here—but there is more. Over the next decades, Vincent bought up the properties surrounding the lost farm. Years after his death, his Congregation emerged as the highest bidder for the depleted piece of land, now in arrears in taxes and auctioned off by court order!<sup>10</sup> He knew the territory.

In particular, he knew the hard edges of the territory. Vincent struggled with the pressures of floundering ventures, some of which eventually failed. His peasant upbringing, but more so the knocks he took trying to manage his organizations, bred in him a shrewdness which hardly fits the image of the otherworldly saint. We hear him, for instance, fending off criticisms of charging too high a rate for one of his hostels for seminary students. "There is no place at all in Paris where the fees are lower than ours, nor is there anywhere the boarders are better treated. And as a matter of fact, because of our low prices, God knows we have to put up with a tremendous amount of inconvenience."<sup>11</sup>

In another incident, he lets us in on what he really thinks of certain individuals who appear religiously minded. To the head of a retreat house he writes, "I'm glad you always have plenty of people on retreat. But you should be aware that quite a number of them, on the pretext of making a retreat, come only for the food. There are types who are only too happy to spend a peaceful seven or eight days at no expense to them!"<sup>12</sup>

Finally, we overhear him advising one of his priests about the need to be hard-nosed in business dealings:

If the tenants indicate to you that they would rather deal with you than with a broker, it is because they expect you to be easier on them, that you will give them discounts, that you will not press them for the rent and will not charge them for any extras.

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<sup>10</sup>Jaquart, "St. Vincent's Real Estate Policy," 191.

<sup>11</sup>Vincent de Paul to Louis Thibault, 4 July 1646, Coste, *CED*, 2: 603; *Correspondence*, 2: 658.

<sup>12</sup>Vincent de Paul to Edme Jolly, 22 November 1658, *ibid.*, 7: 377.

The truth is that you will be able to get satisfaction from them only by dint of threats and actually taking back the property. The easier you are with them, the less they will pay you. And if you put some pressure on them, no matter how little, they will say you are treating them more cruelly than the tax collectors and that you are an avaricious and hard hearted tyrant. This is how ordinary people, especially the poor, treat priests—as if clerics should not take care of their property.”<sup>13</sup>

Incidents such as these seem to deal with economic matters only. But because of the very close connections between government and charities in prerevolutionary France, Vincent’s financial endeavors were inextricably political. To make his enterprises go, he had to deal daily with upper level politicians and members of the hierarchy and, in fact, he himself sat on the king’s blue ribbon review board for education, morals, and public welfare. Over the years, he was embroiled in his share of political squabbles and more than once fell seriously out of favor with the powers-that-were.<sup>14</sup> He knew institutional pressures at close hand.

### Vincent’s Other World

There is another world in which Vincent lived. It is not as easily measurable as his debit and credit one, but those who knew him testified that it was just as real—in many ways even more so. We refer to his faith world, his vision of how things ought to be in light of his convictions about the kingdom announced by Jesus Christ.

One incident from early in his life catches its flavor. On a journey outside Paris, he got into an argument with a lawyer who was not “Catholic friendly.” Holding his own for a while, Vincent felt suddenly vulnerable when his opponent brought up one item—the absence of the Church among the poor in out-of-the-way areas. How could this institution be credible in its proclamation of the nearness of God’s kingdom of justice and care when the impoverished of the countryside continued to receive from it anything but those things?

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<sup>13</sup>Vincent de Paul to Denis Laudin, 17 December 1659, *ibid.*, 8: 200.

<sup>14</sup>See Luigi Mezzadri, C.M., *A Short Life of St. Vincent de Paul*. Trans. Thomas Davitt, C.M. (Dublin: Columba Press, 1992), 56.

How could the Church claim such close connection to Jesus' kingdom when for all practical purposes it had withdrawn from those districts and abandoned the special ones of the kingdom, God's poor?

The truth of the logic stung Vincent. For there was indeed a stark disparity between the kingdom come as preached by Jesus and conditions in rural France. In large part it was to the filling of this gap that Vincent gave the rest of his life. His ideal world was one in which the poor would be able to hear and, especially, experience the goodness of God, most particularly in the actions and attitudes of others. For him, their care was the test case for the actuality of God's presence.

But more than an apologetic proof, the poor became Vincent's divine revelation. Gradually, but dramatically, his value field reversed coloration. Those who had been off in the shadows before, the so called no-accounts, now lit up the rest of the scene. This whole class—dense, intimidating, and impermeable to him in his early years—became a kind of transparency spot for religious experience. And perhaps most tellingly of all, out of all the scenes in the New Testament, two special ones began to leap off the pages at him.<sup>15</sup>

The first was at Nazareth when Jesus came back to his home synagogue and stood up to preach a passage from Isaiah he had selected himself. It read, "The Spirit of God is upon me. For he has anointed me to bring the good news to the poor." (Luke 4: 18-19) Vincent identified with that evangelizing Jesus. On many occasions he had to hold himself back from gushing over at the very thought that he, Vincent, felt so called to carry out that very same charge.<sup>16</sup>

The second appeared at the end of Matthew's gospel when Jesus sits on his judgment chair and decides who will enter the kingdom of his father. The one basis for the decision? Who did and did not help out the needy; who did and did not see in their eyes the eyes of Jesus Christ. More than once in his talks, Vincent sketches in a conversation going on between Christ and some special people standing in back of him.<sup>17</sup> In Vincent's scene, the poor are surrounding the throne and acting as a kind of advisory council to Jesus. One particular case vexes him and Jesus turns to his councilors for help. They inform him that

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<sup>15</sup>Robert Maloney, *The Way of St. Vincent de Paul: A Contemporary Spirituality in the Service of the Poor* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1992), 20.

<sup>16</sup>Conference to the Priests of the Mission, 13 December 1658, Coste, *CED*, 12: 108.

<sup>17</sup>Conferences to the Daughters of Charity, 13 February 1646, *ibid.*, 9: 252; 30 May 1646, 9: 324; 25 December 1648, 9: 454; Conferences to the Priests of the Mission, 6 December 1658, 12: 88; 13 December 1658, 12: 100.

the person in question was good to them in life. On the force of that testimony Jesus gives a favorable judgment. It is Vincent's signature version of the so-called "Great Reversal," the scene where those who seemed to be least of all are revealed as the greatest. And more to the point, those who appeared to carry very little or nothing of the divine turn out to be new embodiments of God's own person, Jesus himself. In perhaps his most quoted passage, Vincent describes the transvaluation: "I should not judge poor men and women by their looks nor by their apparent denseness. Very frequently they hardly seem to have the appearance or intelligence of human beings, so gross looking and offensive are they. But turn over the coin and you will discover by the light of faith that the Son of God, whose will it was to be poor, is presented to us by just these people."<sup>18</sup>

When the mature Vincent looked out at his world, it was these little people, the no-accounts, the socially reprehensible, the politically and economically invisible ones who caught his attention. All his enterprises had as their goal to highlight and make visible the mostly concealed dignity these poor ones had. His interaction with politicians, his detailed manuals for running large and far-flung organizations, his vast correspondence, his attention to seminary and clergy reform, his heavy involvement in fund raising and endowment management, his not inconsiderable legal squabbles— all figured as part of a bigger world in which the preeminent ones were the least of the brothers and sisters.

### Combining Worlds

The point to notice is this: Vincent did not see himself inhabiting two worlds but as holding together two facets of the one world. (Perhaps we might even call it a third world.) It is one thing to claim citizenship in an ideal religious universe and seem to keep that unblemished by avoiding the demands of society. It is another to say that involvement in the pressure cooker of institutions precludes taking a religious outlook seriously. Both positions assume that the worlds are separate and that, at best, one can travel between the two (always precariously) but never have one foot in each simultaneously. Vincent certainly knew their distinctness. But he refused to act as if they stood outside one another.

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<sup>18</sup>Extract of a conference, *ibid.*, 11: 32.

To say it in other words, Vincent, on the one hand, did not bleach out the sharp colors of the gospel by never really giving them body. He did not, out of a concern to keep his holiness “pure,” hesitate to translate them into the always ambiguous flesh-and-bones of societal interaction and enmeshment in the public sphere. Quite the contrary, Vincent’s saintliness existed right *in* engagement with commerce and politics and bottom lines. For Vincent, the kingdom was pursued in the rough oceans and not in the calm of a mountain lake.

While the point might sound obvious —perhaps because Vincent actually did it—it is not to be taken for granted. In the history of Christian spirituality, there is a long standing tendency to associate holiness with escape from the city, to image saintliness as an unruffled existence which has somehow managed not to get jostled in its walk through the marketplace. Vincent takes the other direction. Perhaps more by his actions than his words, he testifies that one finds grace precisely *in the midst of* negotiating the many forces pulling at any institutional undertaking.

On the other hand, Vincent did not think of his business dealings as “just business,” simply juxtaposed to his gospel outlook. His managerial style, hardly naive and in its own way hard-nosed, was internally shaped by his religious perspective. Honesty-laced with prudence and circumspection, fairness but not necessarily prodigality, a predilection for the outcast but not at unjust expense to others—this real world element, concrete compromise, marked his approach throughout.

In sum, Vincent lived in neither an angelic “religious” world nor a no-holds-barred business one. He moved rather in a third universe where the pressures, hard knocks and victories of one meshed with the deep running interests of the other. For Vincent, the kingdom of justice and peace and mutual concern which Jesus announced was not an abstraction. It had to be built right into the dilemmas and ambiguities of marketplace realities. And those realities, in turn, had to be responsive to the peculiar pulls of that kingdom.

### **The World of the Prophet**

Permit a brief digression on this concept of “worlds.” To step into a particular world is to feel the pressure of its perceptions, to notice its set of preferences. It is to see certain values lined up front and center which in some other universe stay back in the shadows.

One special instance of this phenomenon occurs in the prophet. This is a compelling individual whose work it is to lay out a world and invite others to walk around inside it. But the effective prophet's world is not just any universe; it is a possible one. That is, rather than some dreamy utopia, the prophet's country has a recognizable landscape in it. It has contours which have enough resemblance to everyday life to convince the listener that a crossover might just be do-able.

The genuine prophet's ethos is, then, not an altogether separate, totally alternate universe. It is more accurately a fusion of the conventional world and the ideal one. It is a third entity which, because of its difference from the status quo, challenges it—but which because of its plausibility is also attractive. In short, the prophet's imagination gains power to the extent that it is concretely rooted in both the worlds it is trying to bridge. The reader recognizes the contribution someone like Vincent can make here—with his very grounded and yet kingdom-shaped world view. In his projects, he was a fuser of worlds.

### **Vincent's World Brought to Bear on the Business One**

In this final section, we note again that we are not presenting Vincent as a business person who managed to take care of the poor. They, and not the amassing of capital, were his focus. Rather, he presents himself as a very practical visionary who in fleshing out his vision swam in the powerful currents of the institutional world. His involvement in the world of business ran not *alongside* of his kingdom approach to society but rather *together with* it. What can this concurrence say to us?

First, it grounds a very fundamental assertion. It *is* possible to interweave the two worlds. The seeming incongruity of profit and loss margins with Jesus' preferential option for the poor (if we could anachronistically so express it) is not the last word. Approaches which merely juxtapose the two, which see them connected only externally, are not the only possibilities. Vincent's daily business dealings were one of the primary vehicles through which he carried out his Last Judgment vision. And his gospel-shaped view of the better society sprouted only in the air of real world economics and politics. In other words, although it contained many shades of differences, his was a single universe. Even though it knew the pulls toward business-as-usual on the one hand and pure-and-chaste-from-afar ideals on the other, it did not radically separate the two and treat them as parallel

kingdoms. The project of incarnating religious values in a marketplace setting is legitimate. And so is its converse, the desire to steer business by a values-directed compass. Vincent's story is testimony to the process.

Even more than demonstrating a possibility, Vincent's activities mark out a definite path. If one were to look out at present day business dealings through his eyes, there is one core aspect that would light up. How do these endeavors affect the favored ones of the kingdom, the poor? What is the impact on the least of the brothers and sisters?

These hard questions open up toward at least two directions.

### **Shining Vincent's Light on the Culture**

The first is the attitude of the culture toward the poor. In Vincent's day, the word "poor" carried anything but positive connotations. One dominant view regarded the indigent as being responsible in large part for their own hardship. By some deficiency or handed-down curse, they brought their ill fortune on themselves. Standing close at hand was the association with criminality. The poor's general deficiency, it was thought, translated into a moral one: the words "criminal" and "underclass" belonged next to each other. If the poor were overlooked and left behind, it was, to one way of thinking, because they should be. Their poverty was the mark of Cain stamped on them by a just God who rewards the good and punishes the lazy.

Vincent's struggle was as much against this "real world" wisdom as against the ecclesiastical and governmental practices which reflected it. His message, in word but spectacularly in action, directly challenged this anti-poor bias. He would give them high visibility, the kind they had in the Last Judgment scene. Never naive about their failings,<sup>19</sup> not romanticizing the backbreaking kind of work it took to serve them, he nonetheless acted toward the poor as if they possessed a treasure—as he believed they indeed did. They were icons of Jesus

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<sup>19</sup>In the last year of his life, Vincent wrote to one of his associates engaged in relief work in a war-torn area: "I would like to help the poor people who have no land for earning a living . . . by providing farm equipment for the men so that they can work, and spinning wheels and flax or wool to girls and women for spinning; this would be only for the poorest ones. Now that peace is here, everyone will find something to do. The soldiers will no longer take what the people have. They can get things together and gradually get themselves back on their feet. . . . And let them know that they must no longer expect any help from Paris" (Vincent de Paul to Jean Parre, 9 August 1659, *ibid.*, 8: 72-73).

Christ. As privileged bearers of God's revelation, they could not be set to the side as inconsequential or unworthy of respect. To bypass them was to miss the Messiah in one's midst.

The parallels to current attitudes are evident. Competition and scarcity exert tremendous pressures to nudge the poor off the stage and hide them. Not just shunted aside, they have loaded on them many of the same labels attached to the needy of Vincent's day—indolent, dangerous, powder kegs in society, the criminal underclass, the ones to be triaged. In a hard-hitting line, one commentator concludes that "contempt for the poor is a by-product of a culture of greed."<sup>20</sup> While this judgment borders on stereotype, it is the case that efforts to keep the poor visible and important in present culture now run an uphill course.

A second direction is this: Vincent's story exerts a powerful pressure to keep raising up the interests of the poor. His view does anything but skim over their presence. A business outlook inspired by Vincent pays very close attention to certain stakeholders who for the most part are not the stockholders. What effect will this or that policy have on those at the bottom of the pyramid? Who is speaking for the poor in this marketing strategy, in that expansion campaign, in that pension policy? If they do not have a vote, do they at least get the respect of truth-telling, of promise-keeping, of fairness? Are they left outside the conversation as the rights and wrongs of an issue are debated? Vincent's insistence *is* that these people be included, that they not be relegated to the misty margins.

## Conclusion

Our initial question was about the life of grace and our life in this world. We asked more specifically: is holiness internally compatible with dealings in the marketplace? While we might *want* to wed the two, the how of such a marriage is another matter. Our approach has been by way of a real person's life. By listening to Vincent and still more compellingly by following his everyday activities, we can catch a glimpse of the integrating process at work. Even though the thought forms of his age did not encourage him to interweave sacred and secular, he did it nonetheless, and in a deft and mostly unselfconscious

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<sup>20</sup>W. Spohn, "Moral Notes: Virtue Ethics," *Theological Studies* 53, no.1 (March 1992): 86.



way. His life in Christ and his “worldly dealings” came to reinforce each other. His gospel vision permeated his business activities and the world of commerce became a medium for living out his gospel convictions.

A second question was how best to use a saint’s life for the religious betterment of ours. The appeal was to the imagination. What happens to our perception of the business world when we put our assumptions under the power of the story of Vincent de Paul? What happens to our idea of sainthood when viewed through the prism of the serious financial involvement of this particular saint?

As with most meaningful encounters, we might be met with initial surprise. What, for instance, of the attitude an economic columnist recently ascribed to his finance professor: “It’s very simple: make money and then use that money to make more money.”<sup>21</sup> The cleanliness of that statement cannot last long when set against Vincent’s perspective on how the world is. What of the stance that prefers to stand above and not jump into the often swirling currents of business—and from that height comment on spiritual progress? Its credentials are muddled when passed through the hard won spiritual wisdom of this intensely engaged reformer.

The wager is that a third world can be born, a world which in the terms of this argument genuinely fuses the inescapable pressures of market forces with the near but ever receding ideal of Jesus’ kingdom. This, we contend, is Vincent’s universe. As sharers in his mission, we are invited into this world. There we can allow his way of being and acting to continue to work its transformation on our imaginations.

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<sup>21</sup>James Martin, “Prophet Sharing,” *America* 171, no. 11 (15 October 1994): 7.

Now note this, my dear sisters, you should ask one another's forgiveness when you have disedified or displeased your sister so that, by this means, you may heal the wound that has been inflicted.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 25  
April 1652)*

If Daughters of Charity knew God's designs on them and how greatly he wishes to be glorified thereby, they would esteem their state as a happy one and superior to that of religious.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 2  
February 1653)*